

Mariano Barbato

# Power through Pilgrimage: The Making of the Papacy

**Abstract:** Focusing on the papacy's beginning in the mist of history, the papal institution is discussed as an example of a powerful priesthood in the making. Key for the emergence of a supreme centre of religious decision were pilgrims that boosted by venerating the tombs of the Apostles the authority of the Roman priests within a network of writing travellers. Under pressure by recurrent persecution, later invasions and internal quarrels, the sinuously growing papal power projection was possible because Peter's Roman resting place was beyond dispute and an established tradition of veneration was carefully managed. The Constantinian shift started to turn the previously hidden pilgrim sites into a public landscape. The coronation of Charlemagne indicated the successful integration of the new elite into the Roman pilgrimage. By establishing the sacred ground as a nodal point of an entangled web of religious, social, and political fabrics, the leaders of the resident priesthood of Rome became the Roman Popes.

**Keywords:** Papacy, Pope, Pilgrimage, St. Peter, Early Catholicism, Rome

## Introduction: How priests became popes

The ritual of pilgrimage forms part of many religions and is usually based on a sacred journey to a holy ground.<sup>1</sup> The journey to a place under priestly control has a double implication for the political power of priests:

- 1.) with the flow of pilgrims, resources of any kind (ground, human recourses, money) leave the profane space under the control of economic and political elites and enter the sacred sphere under the control of religious elites.
- 2.) the pilgrims, attracted by religious narratives in the first place, are possibly further influenced by the priests at the holy site, whose ideas travel back with the pilgrims and may challenge or support political elites back home.

While the first implication is always a consequence of pilgrimage, the degree to which religious elites can rely on the second implication varies. Due to the direct effect on resources, already the first effect increases the priestly power status. If the second ef-

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<sup>1</sup> Turner 1974; Turner/Turner 1978; Eade/Sallnow 1991; Coleman/Elsner 1995. The first Christian account of a pilgrimage to the Holy Land is the Pilgrimage of Egeria, presumably from the 4th century. For a new edition see: McGowan 2018. For an overview of early Christian pilgrimage see: Dietz 2005.

fect occurs consistently and with noticeable impact, the social, political, and economical influence of the religious elite begins to increase, sometimes so extraordinarily that political elites have to choose between linking the legitimacy of their power to the status of the priestly community or seeking to challenge and reduce the power of the priests. While this mechanism is part of any pilgrimage, few religious elites manage to build a durable status of political power upon it.<sup>2</sup>

A precondition for a stable praxis of pilgrimage depends on memory. First of all, memory is necessary to get a pilgrimage started. An event, a person, miracles, any kind of religious experiences and narratives have to be kept present in a social process of practice at a certain site. Communicated memories of returning pilgrims about their journey spark new departures which spill over incrementally into a stable tradition of pilgrimage. While oral communication is certainly foundational, written reports come with higher costs, and this was even more the case in earlier times of emerging pilgrimage. The existence of written reports depends on resources which the pilgrims had to provide and into which the resident priesthood or political elite had to be able and motivated to invest in. Particularly expensive are monuments and buildings erected to support the narratives. They need a solid basis of interest and proper resources. If monuments related to the pilgrimage are not only erected at the sacred site but spark such a high interest that the pilgrims want to transform their homeland after the model, a particularly powerful praxis of pilgrimage has been established. Despite a difficult beginning, contestations and set-backs, the Roman clergy succeeded particularly well in this respect.

Embedded in a broader perspective on the papal pilgrim mechanism, the contribution focuses on the contested beginning of the papacy. Are there hints within the limited data that are available that pilgrimage had an effect on the birth of the papacy, or is pilgrimage part of a later development only?

As the process of beginning a pilgrimage and not a settled praxis is in focus, a narrow concept of pilgrimage is not applicable. Pilgrimage is understood in the broadest sense as a journey with a religious motivation sparking a new interest in the visited site by communicating the experiences and thus spilling over into a stable ritualized praxis that transforms the narratives and claims of the site into a widely shared and stable tradition.<sup>3</sup>

The claim here is that such journeys turned the cosmopolitan Roman capital into a low-key gathering place of earlier Christianity. Albeit informal due to the recurrent pressure of persecution, the flow of pilgrims supported the Roman clergy's claim of supremacy. The communication by letters and literal texts was based, so the argu-

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2 Cluny's position on the Camino de Santiago would be another example of the Christian orbit. See Dietz 2005, 215–216. For other religions see for example Maclean 2008 on Kumbh Mela or Bianchi 2004 on the Hajj. On pilgrimage and power see also: Barbato 2012, Pazos 2012, and Merback 2012.

3 For pilgrimage as a widespread ritual practice in the Roman Empire see Knapp 2017. For the Christian Pilgrimage to Rome see Birch 1998.

ment here, on a communication by travellers and pilgrims that were attracted by the transformation of the fading imperial capital into a Christian landscape centred on the memories and tombs of the Apostles and the martyrs. The reframing of the Roman Empire after the Constantinian shift, the export of relics and the coronation of Charlemagne transformed the low-key pilgrimage of the early days into a foundational ritual of Medieval Europe.

The argument is developed in the following steps: First the power mechanism of pilgrimage has to be expounded. Briefly, the basic argument that Peter made it to Rome has to be demonstrated. His journey to Rome has then to be integrated into an emerging web of writing travellers and their followers that formed the community that Augustine of Hippo later labelled the pilgrim church. Key for the narrower sense of the pilgrimage to Rome that supported the papal claim of the Roman clergy is the veneration of martyrs at their tombs. Recurrent persecution hindered the development of a pilgrim's landscape around the Roman tombs but, as the next step will demonstrate, the Constantinian shift could reckon with a dynamic flow of pilgrims into the newly erected landscape, as such a flow was alive even under recurrent persecution. Finally, the coronation of Charlemagne gave a new impulse to expand the pilgrim networks and landscape beyond the Alps and established a stable praxis of political pilgrimage, also based on the export of Roman relics.

## The power mechanism of pilgrimage

In order to grasp the possible impact of pilgrimage on the power of a religious authority, some basic concepts of ritual, salvation, and religion have to be recalled briefly. My starting point for understanding the power of pilgrimage is Martin Riesebrodt's concept of religion as a ritual practice with a transcendent promise of salvation.<sup>4</sup> Doctrinal, ethical and pastoral teachings frame develop and transform the ritual. But it is the ritual and its transcendent orientation which constitute religion in contrast to a non-religious world view and doctrine. A pilgrimage can be a sacrifice in itself or enables the pilgrims to make sacrifices at a shrine on a holy ground. The gathering in a sacred space also constitutes the opportunity of listening to the doctrines preached there.

Victor Turner stressed the impact the practice of pilgrimage as a joint experience has on individual and collective identity formation. Pilgrimage is a *rite de passage* as the pilgrims embarks on a journey that is intended to allow the crossing of a threshold, transcending the border of the previous identity. Beyond the threshold, a new communal identity is evoked. Turner's terms for that process are *liminality* and *communitas*. "Betwixt and between" the given old and the possible new order, a free

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<sup>4</sup> Riesebrodt 2010, 108–135.

space of communal creativity evolves.<sup>5</sup> Eade and Sallnow criticized Turner for being too optimistic about the possibilities of freely creating a new *communitas*. Contestations arise always around the sacred space.<sup>6</sup> As pilgrimage is a rite of passage that can be repeated by an individual, not a single moment but the institutionalized practice becomes more important. Thus, pilgrimage is less about revolutionary changes over night and more about gradual changes over long-lasting periods of time.

Benedict Anderson draws on Turner's concept of pilgrimage for his argument about imagined communities.<sup>7</sup> Focusing on the question of power, Anderson highlights an important aspect of how the pilgrim community is held together and how the experience and the imagination are deliberately orchestrated:

There was, to be sure, always a double aspect to the choreography of the great religious pilgrimage: a vast horde of illiterate vernacular-speakers provided the dense, physical reality of the ceremonial passage; while a small segment of literate bilingual adepts drawn from each vernacular community performed the unifying rites, interpreting to their respective following the meaning of their collective motion.<sup>8</sup>

In this perspective, Turner's concept of a communal identity construction turns into a class-based separation of an illiterate mass from a literate elite. The religious experts, the priests, have the power to form a community and to inform the community about the doctrine that shapes their identity. The mechanism might be, however, rather a mutual constitutive praxis in which masses and elites develop a contested common identity nourished by the memorized joint experience that creates a network of elites and masses. Nevertheless, the question about the power of the priest is central. How much influence do priests have on the memory of the masses and to what extent can the pilgrim masses support and influence the power position of the priests? To elaborate on the power mechanism of pilgrimage that forms a stable institution through common memory, at least three aspects of power have to be considered:

Power has a material base and a material purpose: the command and control of resources. Resources do not flow freely. A flow of resources depends on a communication and transport infrastructure. Such an infrastructure has to be created or resumed, which is also a costly enterprise. In addition, it has to be protected and defended against other claims. Finally, the resources have to be invested in a way that further supports and does not disrupt the flow of resources. The crucial question for the flow of resources transcends thus the scope of the materialist focus and sparks into the ideational issue of legitimacy and prospects. Recurrent persecution made this aspect very problematic for the early Roman Christians. The popularity of Lawrence, the martyred deacon of the also martyred Pope Sixtus II in the Valerian persecution,

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<sup>5</sup> Turner 1974, 166–271.

<sup>6</sup> Eade/Sallnow 1991.

<sup>7</sup> Anderson 1983, 53.

<sup>8</sup> Anderson 1983, 54.

who is famous for giving the fortune of the Church to the poor instead of delivering it to emperor, may echo the endurance and relief of a community that was recurrently close to extinction and stripped of all resources.

The (re)flow of resources is generated and stabilized by the ability to offer compelling narratives. In exchange for material resources a compelling narrative has to be offered that is so attractive that it not only legitimizes willy-nilly revenues of the elites but sparks such a high interest in the masses that they are eager to invest their resources and are happy to take goods, words, and advisory narratives in return; blessing and doctrines, as well as relics, are of particular importance in the case of papal Rome. Generally speaking, political scientists called such phenomena soft power.<sup>9</sup> To foster soft power, the resources cannot only be spent on the elite consumption but have to be invested in symbolic power, as Pierre Bourdieu calls it.<sup>10</sup> In the case of pilgrim sites, shrines, and sacred spaces, the religious elite has to invest in a sacral landscape of symbolic power that supports the feeling that the pilgrims have indeed passed a threshold that brings them closer to the divine.

After all, material and ideational structures do not direct the flow of resources alone. Human agency is a necessary third factor that invents material and ideational structures, keeps them going and adjusts them when necessary. Power is thus a relational capacity that constitutes, commands, and controls social fabrics.

The configuration of the model's social strata consists of a more or less illiterate mass that has resources and a literate elite that offers narratives. They are bound together by the institutionalized memory of the pilgrimage and the surrounding narratives, doctrines, and teachings. However, the model would be far too simplistic if both sides would be conceptualized as uniform blocs.

The pilgrims are not the only ones who represent the masses, the sacred site is also inhabited by masses, particularly in the case of Rome. In addition, the masses that embark on a pilgrimage bringing resources to a sacred space are not only the illiterate *hoi polloi*. Although poorer strata of the population are part of the story, in order to enable a flow of resources, the pilgrim masses are not on the same footing as the proletarians of Rome but generally more prosperous. That, however, does not imply a separation of the two strata of masses. *Urbs et orbis* are closely bound together. The masses of the city perform similar rituals as the pilgrims and thus serve as guidance and role models. In addition, the Roman masses also profit from the revenues.

The elite is not uniform, either. Initially, Rome is certainly not ruled by the newly settled Christian priests with papal aspirations. Those who claim being Pope in these early years died all as martyrs on the hand of the imperial elite. Recurrent persecution is the major obstacle for the organization of any pilgrimage. Later, also the lead-

<sup>9</sup> Nye 2004. See also Troy 2010 and Byrnes 2017 for the soft power of the papacy.

<sup>10</sup> Bourdieu 1991, 163–170.

ers of the warrior tribes that threatened and sacked Rome during the Age of Migration were not keen on sending resources to Rome but tried to inherit the flow of resources that imperial Rome once commanded. In addition, when these tribes finally became Christians, they opted for the Arian version of the Christian faith, which was condemned by the Roman clerics. Also, the pagan philosophers and priests in Rome and the whole empire were certainly not keen on sharing resources with the Christian newcomers. Even among Christian clerics, support for a Roman pilgrimage has not to be taken as given. They were also competitors. As far as biblical sources tell us, Jerusalem initially received money from the Christian flock of Rome. Thus, Eade and Sallnow's point about the contestation of the sacred site<sup>11</sup> is key to understanding the rise of the Roman papacy. There had to be a strong movement that turned the biblical promise given to the Apostle Peter, namely that he will be the rock on which the Church is built, into the social reality of the Roman papacy. The Roman priests needed a strong ally against various competing elites. My claim is that the pilgrim movement to Rome, triggered by the deliberately staged and cultivated thresholds of the Apostle, figured as a prominent factor in these developments. Confronted with that social movement, the competing elites, other Christian clerics, but also the warrior kings had to decide whether they ally with the emerging papacy, and support the further rise of the popes, or if they preferred to sideline the ambitious Roman clerics and do everything in their power to stop their claim to power.

## Peter as the first pilgrim to Rome

Within the debate about Roman supremacy, the question if it was a historical fact that Peter made it to Rome, reigned there as Bishop of Rome and became martyred and buried there, was raised very late in the Medieval Ages by the Valdians and Marsilius of Padua. The continuation of the debate,<sup>12</sup> shows how high the Roman stakes for the institutional narrative about the papacy still are. Undoubtedly, the dispute about what kind of role and authority the New Testament (Joh 21, 16–17; Mat 16, 18–19) describes to Peter comes logically first. Peter's life and afterlife in Rome are, however, foundational for the institutional narrative that the Roman priests are his legitimate heirs. Those who own Peter's tomb, possess his key to heaven.<sup>13</sup>

While the biblical acts of the Apostle report Paul's journey to Rome, they are silent about Peter after his miraculous escape from his Jerusalem prison. However, the tradition of the Church passed on also other written sources as authentic and shared also a

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<sup>11</sup> Eade/Sallnow 1991.

<sup>12</sup> Dasmann 2011.

<sup>13</sup> In *Pastor Aeternus* the First Vatican Council was outspoken on this linkage. See Burkardt 2011. For a comprehensive account of the debate on Peter in Rome see Heid 2011.

biographical memory with otherwise side-lined approaches. The summary of Hieronymus that passed on the basic knowledge of the Church about Peter is in fundamental aspects of Peter's life and death not much different from the apocryphal literature, like the recovered fragments of the acts of St. Peter. The traditional knowledge about Peter's journey to Rome, maybe in order to stop his adversary Simon Magnus,<sup>14</sup> has to be understood as an orally kept knowledge about someone whose fate was of interest for a widely spread community of people. That does not rule out mistakes, misunderstandings and manipulation in details. Massive errors in the story would, however, likely have been corrected by a network of Christians who knew each other. The written fragments also confirm Peter's preaching in Rome, his attempt to escape persecution, the famous *quo vadis*-episode, and his upside-down crucifixion in Rome. As reliable as ancient sources can be, it is safe to say that Peter went to Rome, was martyred there around Nero's Great Fire in 64 AD and is buried there.<sup>15</sup>

The Petrine journey sparked an interest that resulted in a romance attributed to Clemence from which the metaphor for the Church as the "boat of Peter" emerged. This evolving tradition created a landscape of shrines and churches associated with Peter's embarking in Leuca and his way through Apulia to Rome.<sup>16</sup>

If the basic concept of pilgrimage is in the tradition of Abraham the departure into the unknown in the following of God's calling, the sojourner Peter can count as one of the first pilgrims to Rome. He was certainly not the first Christian there, as already Paul addressed Roman Christians in his Epistle to the Romans and Paul might have been brought to Rome as a captive before. Nevertheless, Peter's journey to Rome, from the "boat of Peter" to the "quo-vadis" event, marks him as a traveller in the Abrahamic tradition of a free departure for the unknown in order to follow the divine promise to be a foundational figure in God's plan. As such he was part of a traveller network which spread the Christian faith. Those who narrated his life's journey embarked on similar trips. Maybe some of them followed him for the sake of seeing his tomb and backed thereby the claim of his successors that his authority should lead the Church.

## Peter among travellers: authority in the writing travellers' network

Peter's journey and death in Rome is one thing, his position in a line of Roman bishops that due to Jesus' promise to Peter became popes is quite a different story. As the chro-

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<sup>14</sup> Stefan Heid explains the theme of Simon Magnus in the Petrine tradition as taken from late antique theater which has been used to attract a mass audience for Christian interest: Heid 2018.

<sup>15</sup> Duffy 2014, 7. For an extended discussion see Bockmuehl 2007; Heid 2011.

<sup>16</sup> Olivia 2015.



nologically first source for that claim, the First Epistle of Clement addressed to the Corinthians is usually presented, and a certain consensus exists for the year 96 as the year of its origin. Irenaeus of Lyon, originally from Smyrna where he heard Polycarp who had known the Apostles' generation, names Clement in his treatise 'Against Heresies' as the fourth Roman Bishop after Peter, Linus, and Anaclet.<sup>17</sup> Irenaeus knows Clement's successors until Eleutherius, who reigned between 174–189, giving thus an overview of names of the roughly first 100 years of an arguably nucleus papacy in the succession of Peter.<sup>18</sup>

Concerning the question of the papal claim, these two texts have in common that the reference to Peter, Paul or the Roman clergy is made in order to make an authorized proof for controversial claims. The long elaborate First Epistle of Clement was almost treated like being part of the canonical scriptures, and Irenaeus' argument against the Gnostics received high attention. Their standing backed the later frequent but often also challenged claim of Roman interlocution in disputes. Were there only some theologians backing each other for the sake of criticizing third parties?

Two additional sources are of interest in the debate about a specific authority: Ignatius of Antioch wrote, probably between 110 and 130 AD, a letter to the Roman Christians during his journey. He distinguishes between his plea and the authoritative command of Peter and Paul; and Dionysius of Corinth is quoted addressing Soter of Rome as the heir of Peter and Paul's founding in Rome. During the pontificate of Zephyrinus (199–217), Gaius, a Roman cleric, wrote a letter in a theologian controversy in which he backed up his claim to traditional orthodoxy by an explicit reference to the trophy of the Apostles which were superior to other shrines.<sup>19</sup>

Much ink has been spilled on arguing whether these sources are valid enough to back papal claims based on the New Testament scriptures or not. To move on in this debate, the social fabric behind the discourse of these letters has to be considered. The early Christians were not entitled to use the *cursus publicus*, the imperial courier service, they had to use their own network of travellers. Looking on the mentioned writers and epistles, we see a lot of movement among the correspondence. Ignatius like St. Paul in custody to be set on trial in Rome. Irenaeus coming from Smyrna made it to Lyon via a tour to Rome. The names of popes he mentioned tell the story of the Christians of Rome as a migrant community, rather Greek than Roman.<sup>20</sup> The Latin word for pilgrim – *peregrinus* is the same term as for stranger. Apparently, the experience of being a stranger in the melting-pot of the Roman capital and travelling for

17 If there was already a monarchically unified structure of the Roman clergy or if Clement was more a representative of the Roman elders as the Shepherd of Hermas suggests is not the point of question here: See Duffy 2014, 10–11.

18 For a comprehensive account of the earlier sources see Shortwell/Ropes Loomis 1927/1991. See also for short enumerative list and introduction Klausnitzer 2004, 129–138.

19 Klauser 1956, 17–21.

20 Reinhardt 2017, 30.



the sake of the gospel through the Roman world while being spiritually on the way to heaven seems to form the social fabric as well as the imaginary of the Christian community. Travelling was obviously not a rare phenomenon among early Christians. It certainly fits to the mission to bring the gospel to the end of the world but it also builds an “imagined community” of pilgrimage, to use Anderson’s term. Being on the way is not a privilege of an elite or a single individual, like Paul as the most famous among the Christian travellers. Travelling, movement, and migration constitute a mass phenomenon of being on the way in the Roman Empire. The travelling network did not only link single figures like Irenaeus and Polycarp who met the Apostles in Asia Minor or to Clemence and his successor who Irenaeus met in Rome where they might have already lived when Peter and Paul were martyred there. The written relics indicate a much broader network of travellers and the writers among them might be a small minority. Within these movements the focus has to be on hints of Christians ready to embark on a journey that entangles them with the Roman clergy for the sake of the Roman role as custodes of the tombs of the Apostles. They would be the pilgrims who backed as a mass movement the papal claim of supremacy.

## Urbs et Orbis: persecution and veneration

Scholars’ consensus it that the report of Polycarp of Smyrna’s martyrdom in the year 156/157 constitutes the first source that explicitly depicts the veneration of relics and tombs of a martyr.<sup>21</sup> The Greek culture of Asia Minor and its hero worship offers, according to the *opinio communis*, the background that explains the alleged Christian innovation of a cult around tombs and martyrs. As Polycarp died almost a century after the presumable death of Peter and Paul in Rome, continuous veneration of their Roman tombs is thought unlikely. Otto Zwirlein even denied any veneration of Polycarp’s relics.<sup>22</sup>

Following Stefan Heid’s argument against Zwirlein,<sup>23</sup> a closer look at the sources concerning veneration of holy men’s tombs suggests quite a different view. Albeit the term “martyr” is of newer origin,<sup>24</sup> the veneration of holy men who were killed due to their testimony was a widespread Jewish tradition already among Pharisees during the life time of Jesus. The problem of the corpse as a source for ritual uncleanness as

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<sup>21</sup> For an extended debate see Heid 2015, 116–117. For the classical approach on relics and holy men see Brown 1981.

<sup>22</sup> Zwirlein 2014.

<sup>23</sup> Heid 2015.

<sup>24</sup> Bowersock 1998, 1, 21.

a problem for Jewish cult was solved by covering the graves with a monument that forecloses any contact with the relicts themselves.<sup>25</sup>

Linking that missed tradition to the report of Polycarp's death allows a fresh look on one issue of the story. The Jewish community of Smyrna was reported to ask the authorities to burn Polycarp in a way that the flames would consume his body completely in order to avoid the cult around his relics. This, however, was not done by the authorities. Thus, the Christians were able to rescue the treasured relics. Apparently, the Jewish and Christian community of Smyrna knew already before Polycarp's death about the practice of veneration. The very source that seemed to prove the innovative character of a cult around martyrs shows instead that a well-established practice was the issue. Based on these insights, a Christian veneration of the tombs of martyrs is not an invention of the mid of the second century influenced by a Greek cult but the continuation of a Pharisee tradition. Taking the veneration of martyrs serious and rereading the sources carefully sheds also a new light on the veneration of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. The temporal loss of Jerusalem in 70 AD created a vacuum, which might have boosted the veneration of the Roman tombs of the Apostle, martyred a few years before.

Already following the Great Commission to preach the Gospel and baptize followers of all nations created a new kind of taking leave and embarking on a holy journey. A mobile network of missionaries and venerated men and their adherents was constituted through these journeys. The succession of one of these saintly founders, an Apostle in person or someone apostolically installed, was the guarantee for being an heir and thus a representative of the orthodox tradition. The Pharisee tradition to venerate holy men and prophets at their tombs could offer the missing link for how the veneration of the Apostles and their successors could develop without break and innovation but incrementally out of a given Jewish tradition.

An early-on veneration of the tombs of the Apostle in Rome is thus an option that cannot be ruled out but rather suggests itself.

Written sources of Roman pilgrims exist already for the second century.<sup>26</sup> The archaeological excavations under St. Sebastiano (1917) and under St. Peter (1950) confirmed the veneration of Peter at the Vatican and of Peter and Paul at the site of what is now San Sebastiano. Finding two sites for St. Peter's veneration generated hot debates where, when and how Peter was venerated at these two places and why the date of his martyrdom – Nero's Great Fire of Rome was in July 64 – is hidden behind two days of remembrance – 22 February and 29 June.<sup>27</sup>

The contrast between a rich tradition backed by excavations and obvious lacunas and flaws might fit together if a stable outside network generating flows of pilgrims is assumed that stands in contrast to a recurrently persecuted centre regularly close to

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<sup>25</sup> Heid 2015, 123–126.

<sup>26</sup> Birch 1998, 6.

<sup>27</sup> Klausner 1956.

extinction. The pressure of recurrent persecution explains why the First letter of Clemence is not signed and has an enigmatic reference to the more anonymous sojourner community in Rome. What is taken as a sign for an egalitarian structure could be nothing but a politically wise way to obstruct the monarchical leadership of a community whose leaders had regularly been killed as criminals by the authorities. Apparently, it is also a good idea to be vague about the fate of the founding leaders and their burial site, especially if the burial site is held in high esteem. It had to be kept on a rather low profile in order to prevent the intervention by the authorities at these places.

Based on the flow of pilgrims and resources to the tombs of the Apostles, Christianity could not only recover in “Babylon”<sup>28</sup> but managed to reclaim Roman supreme authority. When the centre recurrently collapsed, the periphery became central insofar as the memory of the Roman tombs and their authority, however vague, remained there. The venerating *orbis* rebuilt the persecuted *urbs*.<sup>29</sup>

## Coming to the threshold of the Apostles: creating a landscape for pilgrims

Pope Damasus (366–384) established a full-fledged concept of the threshold or limen of the Apostles: “For him the *limen* of a saint was an actual physical place. It was the area around the tomb of a saint or martyr in a cemetery where the faithful gathered for veneration and prayer.”<sup>30</sup> Damasus was, apart from being of ruthless efficiency in establishing his reign as pope against a competitor, also a literate man and writer who decorated Rome’s holy sites erected by Constantine with epigraphs.<sup>31</sup> Emperor Constantine (307–337) and Pope Damasus (366–384) recollected the memories of the earlier Roman Christians and turned them into the religious landscape that pilgrims to Rome, *Romei* of the Medieval Ages or modern papal pilgrims of today, visit.

Creating St. Peter at a very unsuitable spot, a steep hill that had to be flattened, for a major building, is one of the most persuasive arguments for the authenticity of Peter’s tomb at the Vatican. The majestic basilica boosted the attractiveness of the Petrine pilgrim site. The Constantinian erection of St. Peter, together with the donation of the Lateran palace to become the first church, and other donations started to turn Rome into a Christian landscape for pilgrims. Before Constantine, the Christian Rome was a network of more or less hidden places of a regularly persecuted community. With the Constantinian shift, Christianity conquered the public square of Rome. The

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<sup>28</sup> For Babylon as a name for Rome see Baum 2011.

<sup>29</sup> For a broader discussion of the memory of *urbs* and *orbis* see also Sproll 2011.

<sup>30</sup> Birch 1998, 6.

<sup>31</sup> Schimmelpfennig 1996, 16–58.

popes were not immediately able to deal with the new situation. It took some decades before Pope Damasus managed to turn the emerging Christian Rome into a landscape of Christian memories dominated by the pope. A Roman discourse in stone arose that guided the Roman masses as well as the incoming pilgrims through the newly erected and decorated landscape of the Christian metropolis, at least of the Western orbit of the declining empire. While the Eastern patriarchs had their problem to accept the papal Rome, westwards no Apostolic seat could match Rome and the Roman pope's pilgrim landscape and authority.

Constantine left Rome in order to build his own, second Rome. Now the issue was no longer to survive persecution but to survive the decline of the imperial city during the Age of Migration. Pope Leo I the Great, was able to stop Attila to sack Rome, but Gregor I the Great, had to be satisfied to negotiate only the sacking and not the burning of Rome, sparing also some major churches. These two events were only the tip of the iceberg of the incoming waves of new, if Christian then Arian, lords, harassing the pope and his Catholic flock.<sup>32</sup>

However, not only the Barbarians from outside but also Roman "Barbarian" insiders challenged the rule of the papal monarch. Leo III had been severely injured in an attack by the family of his predecessor in order to prevent him from reigning as pope. He made it to Paderborn at the Court of Charlemagne and negotiated a mutual support that finally led to the coronation of Charlemagne at Christmas 800. A new chapter of Roman pilgrimage began, when a new political elite of Northern Europe had to come to Rome in order to legitimize their rule over other elites.<sup>33</sup> The Frankish King became the guard protecting the pope, Peter's Tomb, and Christianity against Roman feuds of a city in decay.

An important part of the new chapter was the reverse flow of Roman martyrs' relics: the pilgrim's flow to Rome was combined with the exports of relics.<sup>34</sup> Gregor the Great's appreciation of Benedict of Nursia, whose monastic rule had become obligatory for all monasteries under Charlemagne's protection, was key of this new Roman melange of Christianity, including the veneration of Benedict's relics (Fleury Abby) and the spread of relics from the Catacombs all over Europe organized jointly, sometimes in competition by the monks and the warriors. The great Roman Benedict who left Rome for its decay was the ideal herald of the new Christian time which was nevertheless deeply dependent on the cultural background of Rome. When Charlemagne finally managed to overthrow the Saxons, a major transfer of Roman relics to the Saxon lands began. Roman relics, like those of the martyr Alexander, made it almost to the North Sea.<sup>35</sup> The Roman power of the Franks, and, subsequently, the power of the baptised Saxons' elite, were legitimized by a similar mechanism like the papal

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<sup>32</sup> For the emergence of the papal state between the late 7th and early 9th century see Noble 1991.

<sup>33</sup> Classen 1985; Heather 2013, 207–209.

<sup>34</sup> For an overview see Angenendt 2007.

<sup>35</sup> On Benedict of Nursia see Hallinger 1980, on Alexander see Pabst 2001.

power in Rome. The Roman pilgrim landscape expanded from the city into the increasingly papal orbit. However, the rise of the papacy was certainly not linear as the catastrophe of 846 showed, when the Saracens, allured by the pilgrim's treasures, sacked St. Peter.<sup>36</sup>

## Conclusion: The mass base for the making of the papacy

The network of writing travellers and a Roman community under the pressure of recurrent persecution is the baseline for the argument of a living memory of the tombs of the Apostles in Rome. The writing travellers' network spread and backed the Roman traditions of the two leading figures of the emerging Christian community. The much-debated question of succession and orthodoxy was first and foremost a question of personal connection, memories and opinions of these networks. As the emerging Church rested on the preaching of the Apostles, their interpreters, and disciples, a living memory of their teaching, not necessarily of the details of their *curriculum vitae*, was crucial. It was a question of who was *in* and who was *out*. The questions of belonging and believing, go always hand in hand. Reducing controversies and plurality is the recurrent theme that runs through the story of these early Christians writing travellers' networks.

While the settlement of disputes between different opinions in an imperial Roman legal tradition is apparently more likely to be carried out by a monarchical judge with the final appeal to the emperor, things do not run so smoothly towards papal supremacy in these networks of scribes. While the argument of belonging to Peter and Paul might certainly trump other Apostolic lines of succession, scholars and intellectuals prefer an ongoing dispute only temporarily settled by collegial synods. The Fathers of the East, albeit learned readers of the bible, had apparently their problems to accept the papal interpretation of the pertinent Petrine references.

In order to explain sociologically why the biblical references and a certain practice among the writing travellers, to accept Peter's successors as an important clearing authority, turned into a full-fledged papal system, an additional perspective is needed. The doom of Jerusalem's destruction in AD 70 and the lack of Apostolic seats in the West (Antioch, Alexandria, later Constantinople were all located further East) created certainly the geopolitical room for the papal claim, but it would also need a social basis for the room to be inhabited.

The pilgrims are the mass base of whom the writing travellers' network is just the tip of the ice-berg. Beyond dispute, the early Christians' majority, including Peter

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36 Leo IV successfully contained the Sarazene threat. See Herbers 1996, 105–134.

himself, were ordinary men and women, not intellectuals like Paul. They were part of the travelling and migrating networks and inhabited the traffic junctions and metropolises that became Apostolic seats. They constitute the pilgrim church wandering the earth as strangers. But they were also pilgrims in the narrower sense of taking leave in order to visit a sacred site. Given the finding of the Pharisee tradition of the veneration of tombs, masses were apparently integrated into the cult of venerating martyrs at the burial places. Rome gave the best opportunity for a mass base of the veneration of Peter and Paul.

The recurrent persecution explains why these pilgrimages had to be done discreetly and why sources at the site have their lacunae and flows. But the importance ascribed to Peter and Paul and the early-on evidence of mass pilgrims' veneration like the graffiti at the catacombs, supports the claim that mass pilgrimage also from beyond the city was always part of the practice. Indeed, that mass base was able to rebuild the persecuted Roman clergy that had been recurrently close to extinction.

Credence to such a mass basis is given by the later building programme of Constantine. An esoteric ritual of a hidden sect might certainly not boost an expensive building program of an emperor whose ambitions long for a memorial landscape that could integrate not only Rome, still under the influence of the pagan dominated senate, but the whole empire. From that perspective, the pilgrim masses from beyond the walls of Rome play early-on a major part in the flock coming to the threshold of the Apostle. Coming to the threshold of the Apostle constituted the liminal but repeatable *rite de passage* of pilgrimage that created an ever-closer union of belonging to the See of Peter.

Constantine's building programme transformed the previous landscape almost in a Hegelian sense of "Aufheben". Damasus' pontificate showed that new power had to be cultivated by turning the Christian shrines and catacombs into the ideational foundation of Rome.

Again, under pressure from outside and inside papal Rome was not a flourishing site but the declining former capital of a now imploding empire. Attracting pilgrims, instead of invaders, and keeping the internal strives to a minimum, was the main task of the popes in the coming centuries.

The endeavour that established, despite many set-backs, Rome as the centre of western Christianity, was again a journey, the papal journey to an emerging court, that of Charlemagne at Paderborn. The coronation of Charlemagne in Rome as the new emperor depending on the blessing of the pope turned the public into a political pilgrimage. A prominent way to legitimize power in Europa was now to come to the Roman threshold of the Apostles and their custodian, the popes. But the pilgrimage to the Roman relics of Peter and Paul was not a one-way direction. The pilgrims took relics of other Roman martyrs with them. While Peter and Paul were kept safe in Rome, the Roman clergy had no problems to donate other relics to the pilgrims from the Northern forests. Migrating relics and pilgrims played a foundational role in the creation of the new social fabric. Finally, a new term became fashionable for the

mass movement to Rome: *Romani*, the Romans, were complemented by *Romei*, the pilgrims to Rome that constituted the mass basis for the papacy of the Medieval Ages.

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